DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 353 843 FL 020 980

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TITLE Where True Power Lies: Modality as an Indication of Power in Two Institutionalised Domains of Language Use.
REPORT NO ISSN-0959-2253
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 9p.; For serial issue in which this paper appears, see FL 020 971.
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Edinburgh Working Papers in Linguistics; n3 p109-115 1992

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Discourse Analysis; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Interaction; *Power Structure; Speech Acts; *Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Ghana; Politeness

ABSTRACT

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WHERE TRUE POWER LIES: MODALITY AS AN INDICATION OF POWER IN TWO INSTITUTIONALISED DOMAINS OF LANGUAGE USE

L.K. Owusu-Ansah (DAL)

Abstract

This paper considers the language patterning in two situations, the student-staff meeting and student resolutions, with special reference to how the use of modal items in directives can serve as a guide to the balance of power in student-staff interactions.

Introduction

It is commonly believed in western democracies that the political structures and ways of upbringing together have brought about a situation whereby persons in subordinate positions (e.g. children, students, employees, etc.) have a say in the way countries are governed, institutions are managed and family decisions are taken. Such an arrangement illustrates the consensus view of power, according to which power is not concentrated in the hands of one person or group of persons - an elite - but rather diffused through society (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner 1988).

In contrast, it is also held that in other places lacking in western-style democratic institutions, there is a sharp stratification of society with power in the hands of one authority figure or an elite, and that subordinate persons lack a say in decision-making. This second arrangement may be said to illustrate the zero-sum view of power, according to which power is non-reciprocal, i.e. one participant in an interaction has power and the other does not.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that, at least in one specific community, that of the Ghanaian university, neither the consensus nor the zero-sum view of power alone can be used as an adequate descriptive framework of the balance of power. First, brief definitions of power, modality and directives will be offered; second, the language data and the analysis will be presented; third, an attempt will be made to explain linguistic behaviour in the light of context; finally the relationship between formality, power and politeness will be discussed.

1. Definitions

1.1 Power

For the purpose of this paper, 'power' will be defined as the ability of a person or group to influence the action of another in the pursuit of the will and goals of the former.[1] This may be real or imaginary in the sense that, in cases where the necessary felicity

EDINBURGH WORKING PAPERS IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS, number 3 (1992) ISSN 0959-2253

conditions are lacking, the attempt to exercise power may be successfully challenged by the person or persons over whom it is exercised.

1.2 Modality

Modality as a general semantic category refers to all kinds of interpersonal dimension of communication involving the expression of possibility, obligation, permission, ability, etc. as seen from the point of view of the speaker (see Coates 1983, Mitchell 1974).[2]

Although the modal auxiliary verbs in English are the most discussed, other word classes such as nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs do have modal functions (Halliday 1970). In this paper, the term 'modal items' will be used for both modal auxiliary verbs and lexical items which have either primary modal meaning, e.g. *necessary*, or secondary modal meaning, e.g. the verb *implore* in the following sentence:

(1) We *implore* that in every semester the department would draw a calendar informing us of the dates of examinations. ("student-staff meeting")

In this context, *implore*, which is considered rather archaic in British English, denotes 'asking' but it also connotes politeness, which is a secondary, modal feature.

The discussion of the data will focus on one type of modals, referred to as deontic modals, which have to do with the addresser's intention to influence the behaviour of the addressee.

1.3 Directives

These are speech acts by which the addresser attempts to get the addressee 'to do something' (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975). According to Holmes (1983) directives can be arranged on a scale of intensity from strong to weak as in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Kinds of Directives[3]

command
request
advise, recommend
invite
suggest
hint

Directives were chosen for study because the way in which they are issued can be taken as the addresser's assessment of his power in relation to that of the addressee. Strongly worded directives imply that the addresser perceives himself to be more powerful than the addressee, while weak directives imply that he or she believes that the balance of power is in the addressee's favour.

2. Data

The speech of students at student-staff meetings (WMM), and resolutions (WSR) was analysed. Both types of text were collected in natural settings in that they were not

elicited but rather produced to meet real communicative needs. The combined corpus was 7224 words long, with WMM contributing 4953 and WSR 2271 words.

These two situations were chosen because

(a) they both belong to institutionalised domains, by which is menat that they form part of the officially recognised actvities of the university,

(b) they both involve students interacting with participants who are regarded to be of a higher status in terms of the usual description of social stratification of the university community (see Eisenstadt 1973),

(c) they both illustrate situations in which the speaker/writer represents a group.

However, the two situations differ in the following respects:

(a) the resolution is judged to be higher in formality than the meeting,[4]

(b) the resolution is written to be read aloud, while the meeting is first spoken and then written, possibly to be read as 'minutes of the previous meeting'. Only the written texts are used in this study.

3. Results of the analysis

3.1. Distribution of modal auxiliary verbs

There were 61 directives in all in the meeting texts, which had a total of 89 modal auxiliary verbs. Of these 26 (26.2%) were deontic in function, i.e. seeking to influence the behaviour of the addresser (Mitchell 1974), e.g.

(2) We have realised that the time allocated for the African literature is very inadequate ... We would therefore like the Head of Department to always allocate two contact hours for the course. (WMM)

(3) The department should ask the library to put those books on the reserved shelves. (WMM)

Most of the modal verbs in the meeting texts with deontic function were the polite forms such as *would* and *could*, or *should*, which in native English expresses weak obligation (Coates 1983), but in Ghanaian English is a variant of *must*. Even the directives without modal auxiliary verbs generally had lexical modals which clearly signalled politeness. Indeed, in some cases both types of modality were present leading to double modality. (This will be illustrated presently).

There were 31 instances of directives in the resolution texts which had 36 modal auxiliaries. Of these 13 (36.1%) were deontic in function, expressing strong obligation, e.g.

(4) All attempts at implementation [of privatisation of university facilities] *should* indefinitely be suspended in the national interest, until alternative suggestions are adequately examined. (WSR)

(5) The administration *should* consult government and without fear of intimidation point out to government the implications of its actions. (WSR)

There were no polite forms in the resolution texts. Where directives lacked modal auxiliary verbs they were not toned down through the use of lexical modals as in the case of the meeting texts.

3.2 Lexical modals

All of these occurred in the meeting texts where they were used in directives which can be located near the bottom end of the scale of intensity, e.g.

(6) They *suggested* that photocopies of Edufa and No Sweetness Here *should* be made available for students to buy. (WMM)

(7) However, we *would plead* with him to consider the student situation. (WMM)

(8) Dr Yankson said he was *appealing* to the house not to disrupt the games. (WMM)

Both (6) and (7) illustrate double modality which underlines the polite tone of the meeting texts. In (6) the effect of *should* is modulated by the verb *suggest* which is lower on the scale of intensity, and hence ensures that the directive does not become too strong. On the other hand, the politeness of (7) may be considerd excessive in comparison with (6), but this is justified by the fact that this directive was the conclusion to a complaint about the lack of warm relations between students and a member of staff, who happened to be the head of department and chairman of the meeting.

Example (8) differs from all the others so far, because the original statement was attributed to a lecturer. Whether the direct speech had the word *appealing* or not does not affect the student secretary's evaluation that the speaker was 'powerless' at that poi t.

In contrast to the general placatory tone of the directives in the meeting texts, those in the resolution texts were strongly worded and often backed by threats, e.g.

(9) Failure to respond positively to these demands within twenty four hours *may* call for such revolutionary action as *might* not preserve the congenial atmosphere needed for peaceful life in the hall.

(10) We *would* make the University UNGOVERNABLE if Senate insists that examinations should go on as planned. (Original emphasis).

Although *may* and *might* occur in (9), as epistemic modals they indicate the addressers' willingness to carry out the threat and the likely consequence rather than their ability to do so. Therefore, these modals do not signal lack of power. In (10) *would* is merely an example of the conflation of *will* and *would* which is common in Ghanaian English (see Owusu-Ansah 1992 for more examples and a fuller discussion of this phenomenon).

4. Discussion

The result of the language analysis shows that the meeting and resolution represents two different situations in terms of student power as measured in the intensity of their directives. In the meeting situation, they perceive the balance of power as weighted against them and thus tone down their directives, but in the latter they see the balance tilted in their favour and accordingly issue stronger directives. Thus, the meeting situation would seem to support the view that subordinates have little say in the running of the university. This is, however, undermined by what emerges from looking at the resolution, which is clearly that the subordinates have the initiative.

It has been suggested that the intensity of the directives in the two situations may be related to the fact that students feel their demands in WSR are more urgent than those in WMM. There is no evidence from the data that this is the case and at any rate urgent demands can still be formulated in more polite language. However, the present writer's experience is that what is important here is that, faced with the choice of polite and non-polite forms, students invariably choose the latter in WSR and the former in WMM. This observation casts doubt on the theory of 'seriousness of the demand' as a factor in types of directive issued in the two situations under study. The most plausible conclusion therefore is that the choice of directive type is primarily conditioned by the addressers' assessment of their status in relation to that of the addressee in the two situations.

This curious finding has some very important implications. First, it does not support the idea that power is always concentrated in the hands of the persons of higher status. Students, who are of a lower status can and do influence the actions of both academic and administrative staff in the pursuit of their interests.

The question as to why they sound subservient in the meeting situation as compared with the resolution is difficult to answer, but it may be due to the fact that in the latter situation, where speakers represent their classes, they do not feel that there is sufficient 'group muscle' and that speakers in some sense see themselves as personally responsible for what they say at the meetings. In addition meetings are face-to-face interactions aimed at finding solutions to students' problems, whereas the purpose of resolutions is to protest and make demands.

On the other hand, the history of Student Representative Council (SRC) politics at both university and national levels suggests that SRCs constitute a strong political force. Therefore, resolutions, which are mostly adopted at a higher level of organisation than departmental meetings, are situations in which representatives are more confident that they cannot be victimised for presenting the collective view of the group.

Secondly, the results of the analysis have implications for the description of formality. Formal situations are generally believed to be characterised by polite behaviour, including the use of polite language. However, even though the resolution is ranked higher in terms of formality than the meeting, the language of the former is clearly less polite. The tone is belligerent and in terms of the formulation of Brown and Levinson (1987) the directives are face-threatening acts because they leave the addressee with no option but to comply.

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The discrepancy between the situational classification and the language patterning is significant, especially as the language data analysed here was provided by representatives of the same students to whom the questionnaire referred to above was administered. This challenges us to rethink the relationship between language and situation. Politeness in the use of language may be the norm in certain formal situations but it should not be confused with formality, since it is possible to be impolite in both formal and informal situations.

5. Conclusion

Student-staff meetings and resolutions represent two situations in which the balance of power in Ghanaian universitites can be studied. Although in both cases students are interacting with participants of higher status, in one situation, that of meetings, their language suggests that they see themselves as bargaining from a weak position. Hence their directives are extremely polite. In the other situations they perceive themselves as a powerful group with the result that their directives are more strongly worded. The complex nature of the power game defies description in terms of either the consensus or zero-sum notions of power. The sample analysed is too small to support any definitive statements, but there are noticeable tendencies which need to be further investigated with the aid of a larger corpus.

Notes

1. This definition combines the views of both Weber and Poulantzas (quoted in Abercrombie et al. 1988) without being committed to the zero-sum view underlying their formulations.

2. See also Owusu-Ansah (1992) for a discussion of the semantics of modals in Ghanaian English.

3. Adapted from Holmes (1983: 91).

4. In a questionnaire asking Ghanaian university students to rank various situations on a scale of fomality of 0-5, the resolution was consistently given the highest ranking (4.5-5.0), while the meeting was ranked 3.5-4.0. (See Owusu-Ansah 1992.)

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